

Frank Ernst #109
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Q: Mr. Ernst, when did you first join the Army?

A: I enlisted in St. Louis Missouri in November, 1940, and at Jefferson Barracks, Missouri. We were there for about six weeks... well, maybe three weeks it was and we were then shipped to San Francisco and boarded a ship there for Hawaii.

Q: About how long did the voyage take?

A: Oh let's see... I remember my birthday being on the boat, at December the 4th, but I'm sure it was about December 20th or something around there, that we arrived in Honolulu.

Q: What kind of duties did you have in Hawaii, before the attack?

A: Well, I was aircraft maintenance, working on the airplanes, on the B-18's and B-17's that we did have at that time; just a regular aircraft mechanic.

Q: What sort of work did you do?

A: Repairing and inspection of the aircraft as a whole, and doing engine repair on the engines; replacing spark plugs and magnetos and that kind of stuff.

Q: On those B-18's, do you recall what was the most common sort of problem that you had to deal with there?

A: Well, I myself come run into any problems on the things. They just seemed to... we didn't have any major problems with our B-18's, to my knowledge.

Q: What about the B-17's?

A: Nothing major on those.

Q: Which Squadron were you in?

A: I was in the 14th.

Q: What sort of planes did the 14th have?

A: We had both B-17's and B-18's... and the B-17's. Started out with the old B-18's and then the B-17D's, and then we got our newer ships later on.

Q: What was your daily routine like? In other words, how did your day usually go?

A: Well, they get you out for calisthenics, breakfast, come back and straighten up your area, and march us over to the hangar, and if there's any clean up to do we did some of the clean up in the hangar, straighten up things, then go out to our ships, and pull the daily maintenance pre-flights and ...

Q: What had to be done for preflight maintenance?

A: Well, we had to drain the fuel tanks out, any condensation that would collect, and we'd have to run the engines through by hand, or turn them over with the propeller to eliminate any oil that would be in the cylinders, and then just go right through and check all the controls, control cables, ailerons, and the elevators, and our tires, and check those for damage, and that kind of stuff.

Q: Where were you on the morning of December 7th?

A: Well I, after they had taken the 14th (they split it up) and sent half of the people to the Philippines and those that stayed they just assigned us to different organizations. And I was assigned to the 50th Reconnaissance Squadron, which later on was the 431st.

And at that time, a few of us fellows had joined the camera club and we were going to go on a trip around the Island on that Sunday to take some pictures. Well we had just had our breakfast and was up in the washroom getting ready when the first noise came around... explosions you know? We thought maybe it was just the Navy still pulling some more of their mock attacks on us, because we just came off of a maneuver and had our ships dispersed in other areas.

And no one thought too much about it at first, until one hit pretty close, and then everybody began to move around. And I ran to the area that's right in the middle of the barracks. It's open and you look right straight up. And as I looked up there went a Zero right across with a torpedo hanging on him for a suicidal attack on the Hawaiian Air Depot.

So we immediately grabbed everything we had there, shaving gear and everything like that and run down to our bunk, stuffed it under the pillow, grabbed all we had in the way of any emergency equipment, which was nothing more than a training mask and an old campaign hat (laughter). So that's all we had there. And made our way outside and got out of the clearing and got our bearings and everything and see what we could do.

So a group of us went on over to the hangar as quick as we could get there. And when I got there, all there was to lay our hands on the way of guns and ammunition was a .45 pistol. And the ammunition was all loose so we just grabbed a handful of ammunition and shoved it into our pockets. And my cousin happened to be with me at that time and we ran out into the middle of the airfield and to the center of the runway. We had some foxholes dug there at that particular time for that maneuver and we got in there and buried ourselves as much as we could at that time until the attack was over with.

Q: Did you see anybody...any kind of anti-aircraft guns shooting back at the Japanese?

A: Not at that time. Not at that particular time. I think there was something from the Navy was doing some action, but it was rather early in the attack.

After they kind of quiet down around two o'clock I believe it was, in the afternoon, why we were able to scramble out and went back to the hangars. And there was an airplane that didn't get damaged that we pushed out into the center of the field to get it ready to fly. And of course in that process, while we were trying to get it ready to fly and loaded up with bombs, why every once in a while you'd have to run for cover.

And we finally did get one ready to go, and out of the excitement at that time the airplane had aileron rudder locks and elevator locks on the inside, and they were in the floor on a lever down there. And on the take off, why the pilot... not the pilot but the co-pilot got excited and he forgot to unlock that, and therefore the ship didn't get off. He just nosed over and all four props hit the runway and that was the end of that.

Q: Anybody hurt in that one?

A: No, huh-uh. It just couldn't take it... because the props hit the runway, why that stopped that. So we worked around there on different areas. And that evening they came in with some bulldozers and pushed part of those airplanes that were of the new ships that were coming in at that particular time from the states. Those that got damaged by the Japanese, we pushed them up into piles and made those as bunkers for our protection at that particular time.

Q: Did you see any of those planes coming in, landing during the attack?

A: Yes. Yes, flying right in, and of course like they say, they were low on fuel. They couldn't go anyplace else. So they had to land and there were the Japs right behind them. Just as soon as they stopped they dropped their hand grenades right in the middle of the bomb bay... or the radio compartment, where we had flares...

Q: Excuse me, speak of the devil...

A: Yeah.

Q: This is about B-17's.

A: Oh yeah.

Q: You were describing... you were starting to describe the B-17's coming in on the field.

A: Yeah, as they were coming in, they had landed because of the shortage of fuel; couldn't go anyplace else and whenever they... after they got on the runway, why the Japanese were right over them with dropping hand grenades out of their two passenger airplanes...(two person), which went right into the radio compartment where the flares were. And as soon as it exploded

why, of course it just set the plane on fire and it just folded up like that right down in the middle and laid there and burned. And it was a horrible sight, I'll tell you.

Q: I can imagine.

A: Some of the crew... biggest part of the crews were able to get out before they got hit. But some of them didn't; got shrapnel wounds and stuff like that.

Q: What was the scene on the hangar line like?

A: Well, it was pretty chaotic. Uh, bombs were falling all over the place. Some were hitting the hangars and knocking the doors off them and busting the windows out. The ammunition from the gunners, you know from the Japs, were strafing everything out there.

Q: Do you recall how you were feeling? In other words, what was going on inside you during the attack?

A: Well, I guess I was... really didn't take time to think. I would just... more or less numb and just did instinctively what I really thought I should and that was get protection as much as I could. And then whenever there was time available we could go back on the job and work as hard as we could on everything that was there, to get it back to going.

Q: I imagine things were pretty tense... a lot of rumors going around...

A: Oh yes. Sure, sure, sure... When we were in these ... those bunkers we had made temporary out of these airplanes, they drug in the desks and stuff out of the offices and laid over the top of this as more or less of a protection too. And of course it happened to be kind of a misty rainy night and everybody was scared to death because they had heard on the radio that the Japs were coming in by boat to take the place. And of course every time there was a movement from aircraft to some unidentified thing on the ground, why there was just ground fire all over place you know. The sky was just lit with tracers all the time, even though they didn't know whether it was I, or the planes, or the enemy. And uh...

Q: I don't really have any other questions? What do you recall as probably the single most vivid memory you have of that day?

A: Well, the vivid memory of it would be the attack as we were out on the hangar... out on the hangar line, and seeing these other crew members coming in with the new ships, and seeing those blown up as they hit the ground. That's just about it.

Q: O.K., thank you.